Features

The Saga of the Comfortless

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In December 1990, 11 medical officers and a dentist found themselves in Saudi Arabia as part of the Regimental Clearing Station for the Second Armored Cavalry Regiment. Prior to this deployment, most of us were serving in clinical staff positions in 7th Medical Command hospitals and clinics in Europe. What follows is an illustration of the ingenuity commonplace among medical personnel during the Gulf War.

The Concept

The Second Armored Cavalry Regiment (2nd ACR) is a brigade-plus-sized combat unit consisting primarily of Bradley Fighting Vehicles and some heavy armor (M1A1). During this deployment the 2nd ACR was augmented with a number of additional combat, combat support and combat service support personnel and had grown to the size of a standard Army division. The cavalry's mission is to advance rapidly into enemy territory and seek out, engage and fix the enemy for corps combat divisions to destroy.

In preparation for the VII Corps' assault into Iraq, the 2nd ACR was directed to prepare to advance 150 to 200 km into Iraq to engage the Republican Guards' Tawkanda Division. The plan called for rapid movement with little opportunity to stop to treat casualties.

As lead elements in the VII Corps thrust into Iraq, ground evacuation would require passing through two advancing divisions to our rear, which was deemed impossible. Air evacuation resources were limited (we initially expected to have only five medical evacuation helicopters) and flight capabilities were questionable because of weather conditions and control of the air space in the two divisions advancing at our rear. It appeared the only option was to transport casualties forward, treating them on the move. No vehicle on our MTOE would allow us to do this with more than a handful of wounded.

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The Plan

We needed a vehicle that would carry 15 to 20 casualties while allowing room to work, which would enable continuous care to be provided. No military vehicle of adequate size could be spared. The alternative was to obtain and modify a commercial bus. We consulted our supporting maintenance unit, and with their assistance we developed a solution.

The Bus

We obtained two Saudi Arabian Neoplan buses (Fig 1). Using any available metal, maintenance personnel welded steel brackets to hold 11 litters. Seats for eight ambulatory patients were also retained. MRE boxes and cargo netting held supplies adequate to support Advanced Trauma Life Support (ATLS) level care. The first bus completed was named the Comfortless, after the naval hospital ship the USS *Comfort*. Its sister was named the Merciless—no reflection on our care. A fresh coat of white paint and large red crosses and crescents made both buses battle-ready (Fig 2).

A selected crew of two medical officers, a driver and a 91C (LPN) was found for both buses. In the days before the start of the ground war, we participated in ground maneuvers along with the rest of our squad-

Figure 1. Saudi Neoplan bus.

Figure 2. The Comfortless with driver Spec Allen.

ron to insure that the buses were "sand worthy." We learned to maneuver in a convoy, and we were prepared to use Bradleys to tow these buses whenever they bogged down in the desert. All was ready.

Execution

On Feb 24, 1991, the Comfortless and Merciless both crossed into Iraq. Twelve hours into Iraq, tragedy struck —the Merciless tore its brake line and had to be abandoned. The Comfortless moved on alone. In the ensuing 100 hours, the Comfortless was the

Figure 3. CW3 Chuck Bryant placing a chest tube in an Iraqi patient.

Figure 4. Pulling supplies from the Comfortless.

Figure 5. Treating an Iraqi patient in shock.

Figure 6. Medevac helicopter honing in on the Comfortless.

base for treating approximately 60 of the 150 American and Iraqi casualties we saw (Figs 3-5).

Despite the sand dunes, wadis, rain and dust storms, the Comfortless moved on, providing a moving "landmark" in the desert for our helicopter pilots (Fig 6). On the day of the ceasefire, Feb 28, 1991, the Comfortless crossed into Kuwait.

The Final Moments

The war over, the Comfortless continued to act as our holding ward and treatment facility as we sat in Kuwait. On March 10, we were ordered to return to Saudi Arabia. The dilemma arose as to what to do with the Comfortless. Burial at sea was impossible

so, with assistance from our Regiment's ordinance unit and 40 kg of C4 explosives and 200 gallons of diesel fuel, the Comfortless took its last voyage.

Lessons Learned

In retrospect, we rarely used the bus as planned. Instead of a mobile treatment vehicle, we used the Comfortless as a base where ATLS supplies could be laid out, and we treated our patients outdoors on litter stands. Also, the bus provided both patient holding capacity and a place for the staff to grab a few hours of sleep while traveling. Unintentional, but of considerable value, was that the bus provided a beacon for medevac pilots, allowing them to spot us in the featureless desert. Also of no

small consequence was the opportunity to work as a group. The team-building that occurred while working together on this project built our confidence and strengthened the cohesiveness of our clearing station.

Obviously this solution to our transportation problem may not have wide applicability, but it does highlight the need for a mobile treatment vehicle which can carry more than ten patients and still allows room to work.

Most importantly, our experience showed that ingenuity and willingness to look at novel solutions is as important as new doctrinal changes.

Dedications

The Comfortless was the product of a collaboration of many medical and maintenance personnel. Although too many helped to name them all, WO1 Kipp and his team from Maintenance Troop, 2nd ACR, were instrumental in the "birth" of the Comfortless. Also note was our intrepid driver, Spec Allen, who rivaled any New York City bus driver. Finally, the Comfortless was the product of the collective efforts of Medical Troop, 2nd ACR.   ●